

Sermon – “A Faithful Witness”

Sunday, April 27, 2019

Second Sunday of Easter

Scripture Reading: Acts 5:27-32, John 20:19-31

Christian Choi

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

First Scripture Reading: Acts 5:27-32

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” Amen.

Second Scripture Reading: John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My

Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Sermon: "A Faithful Witness"

Text: "God exalted Jesus at God's right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so it is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Christ." Acts 5:31-32

Today, we gather together, a week removed from worshiping and celebrating the most important church day. My first Holy Week here at Westminster is going to be a time to treasure in my life – Maundy Thursday service with clearing of the chancel, Good Friday's lovely candles, and Easter Sunday worship with Milikan brass & church choir singing the Hallelujah chorus that causes your heart and lips are in perfectly in tune as I found myself lip syncing with the lyrics that were filling every inch of this sanctuary. Today, our confirmands will etch a memory as they are welcomed into this body of Christ, worshipping their first service as our newest and youngest members of the church. This is possible due to the faithful witnesses of the Westminster and 2nd Presbyterian church's steadfast endeavor to love God and their neighbors. We are joined by the faithful witnesses around the globe as people are led to hear the good news of the gospel, to take one step closer to fulfilling God's commission.

No matter how far we are removed from the original Easter, the task of the church and the responsibility of the faithful witnesses have not changed; it is to continue the unfinished task of sharing Christ's finished work on the cross, wrapped in Christ's love and peace. From the time of Peter during the infancy of the church and Christians as we read from the book of Act's reading for today to this very moment, our responsibilities have not changed, and so our commitment should not waver either. In this pluralistic world, we need to proclaim the similar testimony Peter gave to the high priests of his time:

The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom the world, you, and I had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at God's right hand as Prince and Savior to give repentance to Israel (God's people) and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these sayings.

Although we know the unchanging task being a faithful witness on our minds and hearts, it is sometimes the fear of other people's judgement that prevents us to act boldly. This was the similar predicament we find the Jesus' twelve faithful's dealing with in our gospel for today, a reading from John. On the original Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples being afraid and hiding in a locked house, saying "peace be with you."¹ All but one disciple who is known to us as a doubting Thomas. He is called doubting Thomas because of his actions in today's passage and the other famous line in John 11:16, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" when Jesus was going to Judea to raise Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha from the dead.

¹ John 19:19

So another week passes, and this time with all twelve disciples present, we find them in an unchanged situation – hiding in fear, behind locked doors. Once again, just like the stone that could not lock him away, the locked door could not hold Jesus from coming through to stand into the presence of the twelve, including doubting Thomas. Out of all things Jesus could have said, he once again says, “peace be with you.” Within short time, by showing the doubter his hands and side, peace of Christ takes over the entire house. The anxiety of some intruder coming in and finding out who and where they are; the fear of the realization of that worst scenario possibility when they saw someone other than themselves; the loss of their confidence, leadership, direction, and their cornerstone in Jesus when they saw him on the cross from a distance; all these flood of emotions washed away beginning with the words – peace be with you.

Some of us might be captive to our own various fears and although we may be disciples and Christ’s followers, we have hidden ourselves behind locked doors. Maybe some of us are renewed and born-again Christians on the inside but the habit and history of our past prevents us from rolling away the stone of our old self to reveal to the world of your new life in Christ. Here are few reminders and the love of Christ that today’s passage shares with us.

First, as Dr. Kieffer mentioned in her sermon last week, we need to pray there will be serendipitous encounter with Christ with each of us. It is Christ who initiates these encounters. Even though God promised “never to leave you or forsake you,”² it is we who forget to keep vigilant watch for the signs of the Lord in our lives. It is often in our darkest times and time of need, as we are hurt and feel powerless that we start to seek the Lord. As Jesus have done to the disciples, it is at those times in our lives that Jesus will be ever more present and visible in our lives, to guide us, to comfort us, and to empower us with the Holy Spirit to do amazing things.

Secondly, if we feel the tug of the Lord on our hearts to be sent or do a deed in accordance of God’s will, we must faithfully answer the call. We do not need to be a new person with a new skillset to start doing God’s ministry of sharing Christ’s love. Jesus showed up front of Thomas with his own marks of suffering and pain. Thomas only believed after seeing the hand that was broken and had a visible nail mark. Thomas had to put his own hands to the pierced side of Jesus where he bled for all of us to believe that the man who came through the locked door was indeed Christ, a Messiah of his life. We as a faithful witnesses have this one false preconceived notion or desire: that our life will be smooth, wide-road before us with minimum turns and plenty of convenient resources along the way much like an interstate. The Bible tells us, however, it is a narrow off-road,³ where we will need to take our own cross and follow after the first

² Hebrews 13:5

³ Matthew 7:13-14

Risen one.⁴ It is through our own marks and imperfections that we will witness to the others who has not yet tasted and seen how good the Lord's kindness and love are.⁵

Let me close with this story I found serendipitously after having a conversation with Karen Sherrick, our Director of Children's ministry. We are preparing for this summers VBS with a theme, *To Mars and Beyond*, to be a steadfast neighbor and to carry on the lineage of being a faithful witness here in Springfield. We would love to have you be a part of it. Well, we got to the discussion of having rockets and space shuttles. It was then when Karen who was a teacher at the time about her dealing with the loss of the space shuttle challenger. Her school was following closely to the 10th voyage of the space shuttle Challenger on Jan. 28, 1986, for it had the first civilian school teacher-astronaut on board and its close ties to math and science programs at the school, remembering the unexpecting a tragedy that ensued after its 73 seconds of flight in front of her students. This led to the following find.

As all of you may be aware, none of the seven astronauts survived that flight. Just by thinking how high and fast the shuttle was, it is incomprehensive that anything would survive the explosion. But one thing on the Challenger did survive; Astronaut Ellison Onizuka's soccer ball, the first Asian-American and first Hawaiian ever to travel in space.

He was an assistant coach for girl's soccer team at Clear Lake High School, just four miles from the Johnson Space Center. His daughter was on the team and rest of her teammates signed a ball for him, which El decided to take it into space. When the Onizuka's family received the ball from NASA, the family decided to return it back to school. And for 30 years it sat in a display case along with many other trophies, until a parent of the school saw the ball – being a faithful witness to the event and offering to make its own case to the principle.

And then few days later, the principal was offered by another parent, named Colonel Shane Kimbrough, an astronaut preparing for his second flight to International Space Station, asking what he can bring on behalf of the school to space!

As you can feel where how this story ends, the soccer ball travels to space for 173 days on the International Space Station. It is back now at Clear Lake High School, sitting on its own display case, where grandchildren of Ellison attends, along with thousands of students pass by it daily.⁶

There must be nothing more thrilling and dangerous than being at the edge of space. As astronauts continue to carry on their mission, we as faithful witnesses to Christ's legacy

⁴ Matthew 16:24

⁵ 1 Peter 2:3

⁶ Story was reported on ESPN's E:60. Find the full story/article here:

http://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/23902766/nasa-astronaut-ellison-onizuka-soccer-ball-survived-challenger-explosion

also must continue to carry on continue the unfinished task of sharing Christ's finished work on the cross, wrapped in Christ's love and peace by sharing our faith and explaining our marks of the spiritual journey. Perhaps all of it can be started with the following words: Peace be with you. Amen.